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Creative u-learning: Complex ICT Use at the Masaryk University Language Centre

Abstrakt (Creative u-learning: kompleksowe zastosowanie narzędzi ICT w Centrum Językowym Uniwersytetu Masaryka w Brnie). Autor przedstawia proces wdrażania w środowisku akademickim kompleksowego, elastycznego i zindywidualizowanego systemu nauczania języków obcych opartego na narzędziach ICT. Centrum Językowe Uniwersytetu Masaryka (CJV) prowadzi działalność dydaktyczną i naukową związaną z szeroko rozumianym rozwojem i zastosowaniem ICT i multimediami. Wachlarz narzędzi komunikacji synchronicznej i asynchronicznej (Facebook, czat, wideokonferencja, e-mail, forum, blog, YouTube), połączony z ćwiczeniami indywidualnymi i grupowymi prowadzonymi na systemach LMS (Moodle, IS MU) oraz poza nimi, daje nowe możliwości w zakresie polepszenia nauczania języków obcych.

Zaprezentowane w artykule trzy typy kursów prowadzonych przez CJV pokazują konkretne narzędzia i skupiają się na różnych metodach ich zastosowania. Głównym celem wykorzystania przywołanych narzędzi jest głębsze zaangażowanie studentów w realne sytuacje akademickie lub zawodowe, jak również zwiększona aktywność w środowisku, w którym mogą ćwiczyć i doskonalić umiejętności językowe, zawodowe i społeczno-kulturowe.

Abstract. This paper analyses the implementation of ICT enhanced complex, flexible and individualised language learning in the university environment with the aim to share its effectiveness. Masaryk University Language Centre (CJV) engages in teaching and research activities closely related to the development and use of ICT and multimedia in general. A wide range of synchronous and asynchronous communication tools (Facebook, chat, video conferencing and email, forum, blog, YouTube) combined with individual and collaborative activities within an LMS (Moodle, IS MU) and outside offers new opportunities to the improvement of foreign language learning.

The presentation of three types of CJV courses analyses individual tools and focuses on various approaches aiming at deeper involvement of university students in real academic or expert situations as well as their intensive engagement in an environment where they can test and improve their language, expert and socio-cultural skills.

1. Introduction

The accelerating development of interactive information and communication technologies (ICT) and multimedia have changed our society considerably. New types of professions, new modes of behaviour and new approaches to private or public space, they all have brought the necessity to adjust our educational systems to the demands of the knowledge society and focus on the use of ICT and multimedia in the university environment.

Individual sectors in higher education reflect this situation in diverse ways. This paper presents an analysis of the implementation of ICT enhanced complex, flexible and individualised language learning in the setting of the Masaryk University Language Centre (Centrum jazykového vzdělávání CJV MU) with the aim to share its effectiveness. The text is divided into three parts: first, the theoretical background to the ICT use in higher education and its consequent shifts in teacher-student interaction are offered; second, the approach of CJV MU to ICT and multimedia enhanced creative language learning is introduced; and finally three types of innovative English courses, namely *The Intercultural Communication*, *Academic Writing for PhD students*, and *Creativity*, are analysed from the perspective of the ICT and multimedia use with the focus on various approaches aiming at deeper involvement of university students in real academic or expert.

2. ICT and media enhanced education within higher education

In spite of the fact that academic institutions have a relatively easy access to ICT and multimedia facilities, not many use them as creative, collaborative and dynamic interactive tools. In other words, a number of universities still employ relatively safe traditional methods of teaching, which might be limiting to the current educational potential. The use of new interactive methods are often promoted and motivated with the vision of their potential benefits, on the other hand, “we have to take into consideration the fact that its effective utilization entails a profound restructuring of the existent systems and processes in cultural, economic, social, political and even technological terms” (Pettenati 2000).

In order to understand the current transformation of classrooms into highly developed technological settings, it is essential to mention new roles of teachers and students. Multimedia and ICT are believed to extend teachers and students’ ability to communicate and collaborate in a dynamic, interactive way almost automatically. The implementation of flexible and creative educational methods based on effective use of ICT, however, is not an easy task as it presupposes a cultural shift of both teachers and students (Motteram 2006).

The creative approach to ICT and multimedia enhanced methods in education brings, basically, two consequences: First, its application requires more organisation

and structural planning, in other words, it is more time and preparation demanding. Moreover, teachers can often be traumatised by the idea of entering an unexplored area of electronic environment and meeting a class of ICT savvy students. On the other hand, it is important to say that to use modern equipment, teachers do not need to become technical experts. On the contrary, some basic ICT skills and above all “understanding of the pedagogical rationale for using the technology can suffice to produce sound teaching practice” (deHaaff 2008).

The second consequence reflects the fact that current generations of students do not know the world without the internet or mobile phones (Zwimpfer 2007). They live in the era when new ICT tools can be characterized by their high quality, relatively low price and easy use (Young 2006). Therefore, students usually consider the presence of collaborative ICT based learning a natural environment and expect it without difficulties. Thanks to this familiar environment they may feel they can “learn more”, which is of high importance. On the other hand, subjective positive feelings cannot be confused with the real level of what they learn (Qvist 2006). Moreover, “enjoying” the learning process is not a guarantee to learner’s automatic effort invested in learning (Temple 2006).

To put it simply, teachers have to be aware of the fact, that the implementation of ICT does not mean using the largest numbers of the newest technologies, but a carefully planned implementation of such tools into the standard classes, which will lead towards the most effective ways of learning (Daunt 2007). The ICT and multimedia enhanced environment is here, then, to create a complex net where information presented by one medium must complement or deepen the information provided by a different medium (Baily 2001). Ideally, an intensively ICT and multimedia enhanced language course should provide such a setting where learning does not depend on teacher’s availability, their abilities or will, but on mutual communication and exchange of real experience of students, teachers and external actors in a diverse, but complex environment.

3. Masaryk University Language Centre Approach

Masaryk University Language Centre CJV MU, the largest university language centre in the Czech Republic, engages in teaching and research activities (e.g. INVITE, EILC, COMPACT, MEDEA-AWARDS) thanks to which numerous innovations, such as videoconferencing, wiki tasks, collaborative tasks, group evaluation or online peer review have been implemented into its language programmes. CJV MU selects tools corresponding with constructivist theories which can provide intensive, complex and authentic up-to-date social and cultural dimensions in language learning and which have the potential to expose students to the language in a highly intensive manner. It is also believed that an appropriate combination of creative ICT teaching methods combined with the traditional ones can become a new pedagogical tool which could fully satisfy current needs of academic language education.

The excessive use of ICT and multimedia is also supported by the community-of-practice communication which can exist within and across more typical academic conformity based discourse communities (Morgan 2008). Unlike discourse communities that operate traditionally by means of set standards of appropriate communication in a top-down style within a given hierarchy – usually, experts inform students, who are supposed to follow required rules and guidelines – communities-of-practice are shaped by a combination of formal patterns of communication with an informal exchange of information within a negotiated learning environment. Reciprocal obligations of all course participants shape an adaptation of shared knowledge “where thoughts are compared, contrasted and justified by social exchange” (Morgan 2008). Consequently, the community of practice learning setting is characterized by higher flexibility and therefore offers a better environment for constructivist learning methods.

4. CJV MU Courses

CJV MU provides a large scale of language courses. Since 2009 a total number of 98 new and innovated courses for students and university staff have been piloted and successfully implemented into the Masaryk University language programmes. Such an amount requires a greater variety of teaching methods and strategies used. To show at least some of them, three types of CJV MU courses and methods used, all based on intensive use of ICT and multimedia tools and creative teaching methods, all with the aim to offer learner-negotiated real-life situations, are presented.

4.1. The Intercultural Communication English Course

The Intercultural Communication English Course prepared with the Aberystwyth University (UK) is a complex language programme whose aim is the development of academic language skills in an intercultural setting. The course is divided into a stream of successive interconnected tasks and projects in order of increasing difficulty that lead towards academic team presentations at its end. Multimedia and ICT tools play an essential role: videoconferencing provides a tool for synchronous communication while Facebook offers a space for the asynchronous one (with the average length of 250 words per a written assignments).

Learners from three to twelve nationalities are engaged in negotiations over the course content around interdisciplinary cross-cultural topics. Their individual and collaborative tasks; formal-informal and synchronous-asynchronous forms of communication are recorded (posts to the forums, written assignments, wiki activities are accessible online; recorded VC sessions can be re-watched and/or analysed). The formal goals are set at the beginning of the course but kept in balance with the informal ones that arise from discussions and activities throughout the course of the programme. The final success of such a module depends on the group dynamics within the teams – their task is to discuss possible topics ranging from *Fast Food*, *Corporate Responsibility* or

The Impact of Media on Society to Principles of Fairy Tales in Different Cultures or A Comparison of World Toilet Cultures. Students also need to carry out the audience analysis, prepare discussion and interactive tasks framework, choose audiovisuals, or set objectives and distribute responsibilities. Here is an example:

“Hi all. I send you more details about our work. Group number 2 has chosen the topic ‘Influence of advertisement on human life’. We think that it’s an interesting topic because you meet a kind of advertisement every day and you don’t realize its impact to your lives. Each member of our group has his/her own subtopic. Here you are: Hirona – Internet advertisement; Jason – Drug abuse advertisement; Katka – Advertisement in magazines; Lucka – Brainstorming; Lucie – Newspeak; Tung – Advertisement in TV; We’ll try to describe you these topics and make a conclusion together. You will see how you’re influenced by ads”.

The role of a teacher is, on the other hand, shifted into that of a course facilitator responsible for keeping the balance of activities within the course frame. Therefore teachers have to adopt different styles adequate to different situations on Facebook. Here are some examples:

- “When referencing from internet sources students should do as follows:”
- “Hello all and welcome to round two of VC. I hope you are all ready and willing to discuss the topics we intend to challenge this year. The first one, as you can see, is Freedom and Liberty.”
- “Please take a look at this excellent video, contributed to the Corporate Responsibility discussion by Roberto – THANK YOU ROBERTO :0)))”

Participants’ feedback shows that the use of technologies improves language learning experience and is appreciated by both ends.

4.2. Academic Writing for PhD Students Course

The Academic Writing for PhD Students Course is an interdisciplinary course whose aim is to prepare PhD students and young researchers for high quality writing and current science communication needs. Students develop a net of creative cooperation where they peer review, analyse and comment writings of their colleagues. Via videoconferencing they discuss publishing industry market needs with publishing experts, and watch and/or join analyses of their texts presented by text analysts from three different countries. All materials including recorded VC discussions are online for students’ disposal.

The basic course structure is divided into three F2F blocks which concentrate on discussions and exchange of experience. The contact blocks (recorded and made available to students who were either absent or who would like to re-watch the sessions) use online text materials combined with short video extracts from speeches of experts and conference papers.

Between the block sessions, students deal with individual and collaborative tasks. This asynchronous part of the course is divided into an individual “text production”, collaborative discussion and peer review. Course participants post titles of their papers or theses, problematic sentences from their texts and abstracts of their research to the course discussion forum where they comment, analyse and express their opinions

on the quality of their colleagues' work. Most discussions turn into a help-advice-suggestions style of discussion:

“– Hello, I’m posting title of an article I’ve just started to work on ... “Social Network Facebook as an Event Promotion Platform subtitle: Initial Research Targeted at Czech Students in the 17–24 Age Group” ...

– Hello, ... I found it quite long. I do not know if it is possible but can you define the 17–24 Age Group with one word ...? ...

– Thank you! I agree. I would even take your suggestion a bit further by cutting it down to “Social Network Facebook as an Event Promotion Platform: Initial Research Targeted at Czech Students... ”

– Hello..., I like your title, but I also find it quite long and I also see some possibility how to shorten it. Maybe it would be enough today to leave Facebook without the description of “social network”? ...

– Hello ... I really agree Just the word Facebook is enough today everybody knows what it is ...”

A different writing task that simulates one of the processes students’ texts go through before they are published is a peer review. New software is used to generate automatic anonymous facilitation of the task. Apart of the peer review itself, the teacher reflects students’ ideas mentioned in the analyses. That reflection summarizes key thoughts and areas of thoughts, such as (1) excuses where learners’ self doubts or lack of expertise in the given field are expressed; (2) descriptions of the text content; and (3) text analysis that includes detailed comments on individual mistakes and recommendations for improvements.

Although students understand the importance of both, the theoretical and practical, collaborative exercises which help them to practice and develop their writing skills, they regard videoconferencing as the most attractive part of the course. Professionals from the publishing industry (Routledge, OUP) discuss current needs of the international publishing market with students; academics from various universities (Aberystwyth University, Birmingham University, SOAS London) give interactive VC lectures on writing; and international experts on writing analyse students’ texts, explain their points of view, suggest improvements or possible changes and students have chance to discuss their own writing in a multiperspective professional debate.

4.3. Soft Skills: Creativity in English

The Creativity in English Course is an example of the soft skills courses that have been implemented into CJV MU programmes. All courses combine ICT enhanced with traditional and non-traditional teaching techniques in order to provide complex language learning within the academic framework.

The following *Emoticon story* activity is a creativity barrier elimination task from the course. Students are instructed to look at the picture story from the “Rives tells a story of mixed emoticons” video (Rives 2007) and decode its meaning. Then they watch the original story and the idea of various ways of transcriptions is discussed. The course participants are then divided into small groups with the aim to produce a story and transcribe it in their own original emoticon/symbolic/coded alphabet (cell phones, computers or “traditional” paper can be used). The next step is to send the

stories to the other groups whose task is to “decode” the encoded stories. Later, the decoded versions of the stories are compared with the original ones. These sessions are usually full of creativity, fun and collaborative enthusiasm. The pedagogical aim, however, is to draw learners’ attention to the process of translation which is often considered a rather boring ordeal. Students analyse their creativity barriers in foreign languages and discuss possible ways of improvement.

Students’ reactions to the soft skills courses are mostly positive:

- (a) *...I learned everything has got some solution. ... Try to cancel barriers of creativity...*
- (b) *...It was fun. And I liked that there is no reason to have a fear of making mistakes...*
- (c) *...It was interesting and I hope it can help me in communication with people and in some cases to solve particular problems or tasks, alternatively to understand my choice of the solution...*

5. Conclusion

The analysis of three ICT and multimedia enhanced CJV MU courses showed that ICT and multimedia tools enable engagement of language learners in truly interactive, flexible and dynamic learning. To ensure that good quality learning takes place, however, institutions, teachers and learners need some adaptation to the new conditions. Theoreticians must introduce clear methodological approaches that would enable academic institutions to set a complex framework within which ICT and multimedia enhanced learning programmes could be created. Teachers should enhance effectiveness of the learning process by promoting a learner-centred environment; by creating both independent and collaborative learning opportunities; by supporting application of social networking, while paying special attention to the effective use of complex ICT tools; they should, therefore, take the position of a course facilitator, administrator and expert advisor who shares responsibilities with the rest of the learning community. Students, on the other hand, who are turned into co-authors of the learning activities should engage in more individual, independent and responsible communication within effective patterns and standards of the newly created setting.

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